

NOT YOUR PUNCHLINE

Asian stereotyping is too normalized at East



by katie murphy

SAT AT the “Asian table.”

The two other Asian students in my eighth grade geometry class made up the remainder of our table in the corner of the room. A coincidence in a seating chart led to daily snickers and snide comments about our Asian-ness, making me stand out more than usual at an 82% white middle school — a number far exceeding the average 47% in schools across the U.S.

“Ching chong,” some of the white students would taunt us from across the room.

2.2% •

OF EAST STUDENTS
ARE ASIAN

I’m not even Chinese — my mom is from Vietnam.

Math also happened to be my lunch period. I grew accustomed to hearing the “Did you eat dog for lunch?” line in the hallways on the way back to class — it was a good day if I didn’t.

On top of the jokes, the “Asian table” was always expected to get the best grades. Our classmates would come back to our table first to ask the three of us for help and then gloat if they out-scored us on tests. Outsmarting the kids with academia in their blood? Quite an astonishing feat.

At the time, my middle-school social skills left me with one option when faced with demeaning commentary — awkwardly laugh it off.

I’ve heard and seen all the stereotypes since then — ni hao, pulling eyes back, bad driver. People saying they look “Asian” in bad pictures of themselves. White students counting the number of Asians in the room, then ranking us from “least” to “most” Asian-looking or acting. Throw COVID-19 into it and add the “eating bat” comments and virus jokes.

Academic success is an

expectation for my race. Cramming Calculus theorems past midnight, filling in pages worth of bubbles on ACT practice tests, canceling dinner plans to stay home and study — all efforts that are invalidated because of where my mom was born. I’d prefer if people would acknowledge my hard work instead of writing me off with the “smart Asian” stereotype.

Now that I’m more socially aware, I have two options when being stereotyped: laugh along or call it out. If I play along, I’m left uncomfortable and feeling like I can’t stand up for myself. If I call someone out, they’re uncomfortable and may deflect by calling me sensitive. It’s a lose-lose situation.

Even with society’s increased awareness of racism and discrimination today, similar comments continue to float around the East community. Immature middle schoolers have turned into slightly more mature high schoolers who still make the same dumb Asian jokes.

I don’t understand why people make comments about my race in the first place. Asian “jokes” aren’t funny to begin with — who hasn’t heard them before — and it’s not like there’s a shortage of comedic material in subjects that don’t involve my ethnicity.

I’M NOT SAYING that we need social justice warriors marching to save the day here. I’m just asking that we denormalize making Asian jokes. And if jokes are made, simply stop laughing along.

I’ve never wanted to be that person who can’t take a joke and blows little things out of proportion. But as I get older, I’m realizing that

Asian stereotyping shouldn’t be as common as it is. It feels more socially unacceptable to confront someone about making a racist joke than to make one in the first place.

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Don’t get me wrong — most of the time I feel comfortable and respected at East, but it’s these little moments and conversations that can leave me feeling like more of an outsider.

Not to mention, I’m struggling to completely embrace my heritage in the first place. Sometimes I feel “too Asian” for East and “too white” for my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. It’s degrading to smile through a snarky comment about the shape of my eyes as the only not-fully-white person in the room — like I’m letting half of my family down.

Unfortunately, conversations with my half and fully Asian friends at East have revealed that I’m not alone in feeling out of place at times. Only 2% of our student body is fully Asian while less than 5% has mixed Asian heritage. Most have their own share of uncomfortable stories. No one wants to be put in awkward situations or feel singled out during passing period.

As only half Vietnamese, my experiences may be more toned down than others. Other races are placed into their own box of expectations and face stereotyping around East as well. I understand my experiences are not even close to the worst thing in the world, but that doesn’t make them less unfair and uncalled for.

I’m tired of people thinking they can get away with stereotyping Asians. I don’t care if you’re my best friend or my least favorite person — don’t make my race your punchline. There are no exceptions.

THE EAST EXPERIENCE

Asian students at East share their perspective being in a predominantly white school

NINA YUN • SOPHOMORE



IN WHAT WAYS HAVE YOU FACED ASIAN STEREOTYPING AT EAST?

I get a lot of dog jokes and smart jokes. Just the other day, it was “What type of Asian are you? It doesn’t even matter,

they’re all the same anyways.” Last week, someone wrote (anti-Asian slur) on the

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HOW DO YOU RESPOND WHEN PEOPLE SAY THINGS THAT MAKE YOU UNCOMFORTABLE?

Laugh it off. It’s bad, but sometimes I feel like I’m Asian enough for people to make fun of me, but I’m not Asian enough to stand up for myself. I don’t want people to think I’m over-dramatic or overreacting. If people don’t understand what they’re doing is wrong, then they aren’t going to understand my reaction.

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TONGTONG YI • SENIOR



IN WHAT WAYS HAVE YOU FACED ASIAN STEREOTYPING AT EAST?

It’s not something that happens just once or twice. It’s pervasive and affects how people treat you in general. From the beginning, there’s an expectation to be this “model minority.” If you do well academically, it’s because you’re Asian. If you do poorly, you “failed” your race. It’s unfair because you’re your own person. Despite people saying it’s a “good” stereotype because you’re not associated with the even worse stereotypes attributed to other groups, the myth is still harmful.

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HOW DO YOU RESPOND WHEN PEOPLE SAY THINGS THAT MAKE YOU UNCOMFORTABLE?

One of the worst parts of the nature of racism is how accepting of it you grow to become. You don’t know when to speak up or if you’re worthy to. The last 13 years growing up in this district, I’ve literally been the only one to come from a family that is fully Chinese. We moved here when I was one. I’ve always been treated somewhat differently. If it’s not the eye or dog jokes, it’s the sense that no matter what I do, these comments will always exist. Over 13 years, I still don’t know how to respond. I’m just so used to it. I don’t want the new generation to feel accustomed to those kinds of jokes in the same way that I became accustomed.

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